

No Dilemma for the Proponent of the Transcendental Argument: A Response to David Reiter

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David Reiter has recently argued that presuppositionalists who champion the transcendental argument for God's existence ("TAG") face a dilemma: depending on what conclusion the argument is supposed to establish, either TAG is inadequate to deliver that conclusion or else TAG is superfluous (thus bringing into question claims about its importance and distinctiveness as a theistic argument).¹ By way of reply, I contend that several plausible lines of response are available to the proponent of TAG in the face of this purported dilemma.

Before dissecting Reiter's argument, some preliminary remarks are in order. It should be recognized at the outset that there is no definitive formulation of the transcendental argument, just as there are no definitive formulations of the ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments. When philosophers discuss "the ontological argument," for example, what they're typically referring to is a *family* of theistic arguments that have a common theme or goal, namely, showing that the existence of God follows from the very idea of God. Likewise for "the cosmological argument" (a family of arguments from contingency or change in the universe) and "the teleological argument" (a family of arguments from apparent design in the universe). I suggest that "the transcendental argument" should be understood along similar lines; specifically, as a family of theistic arguments from the possibility of human thought and experience. We ought therefore to be skeptical of any claim that *the* transcendental argument has been refuted or shown to be misguided.² It would be a tall order indeed to show that no argument of this kind could succeed *in principle*. No doubt it's quite likely that some

¹ David Reiter, "A Dilemma for the Proponent of the Transcendental Argument for God's Existence," *Philosophia Christi* 11, no. 2 (2009): 465-469.

² One thinks of the pretensions of Hume and Kant with respect to the ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments. Despite their claims that this triad of theistic arguments should be pronounced dead on arrival, versions of each are alive and in fine fettle today. See, e.g., William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

formulations of TAG are unsound or otherwise problematic. Nevertheless, it wouldn't follow that *no* formulation of TAG is (or could be) successful.

To be fair to Reiter, his characterization of TAG seems to recognize this point:

The gist or "theme" of this argument is that the existence of the Christian God is in some way a metaphysically necessary precondition for one or more of the most basic features of human life and experience.³

In my view, this is a perfectly respectable description of TAG as a *family* of arguments or as a *project* in theistic argumentation. After giving this summary, Reiter immediately laments the absence of a "clear and detailed statement of exactly what the argument is." While this might suggest he thinks there ought to be an official version of the argument lurking out there somewhere, perhaps his point is merely that there is no clear and detailed statement of *any* version of TAG in the literature, even granting that TAG can be formulated in different ways. In any event, my purpose in making this preliminary observation is not to criticize Reiter (with whose lament I sympathize) but to caution against interpreting the dilemma he poses as problem for TAG *in principle*. At worst it is a problem for certain *formulations* of TAG (formulations which admittedly have some basis in the literature).⁴

I turn now to the details of Reiter's dilemma for proponents of TAG. He begins by identifying three theistic argument patterns, where *p* stands for some unspecified proposition and *G* stands for the proposition *God exists*:

Pattern I:

(1) *p*.

(2) If *p*, then *G*.

So (3) *G*.

³ Reiter, "A Dilemma for the Proponent of the Transcendental Argument for God's Existence," 465.

⁴ Reiter's dilemma would appear to apply, for example, to Don Collett's formalization of the transcendental argument. Don Collett, "Van Til and Transcendental Argument," in *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2007), 258-278.

Pattern II:

(1) p .

(2) Necessarily, if p , then G .

So (3) G .

Pattern III:

(1) Necessarily, p .

(2) Necessarily, if p , then G .

So (3) Necessarily, G .

Reiter notes that while all three patterns are logically valid, only pattern-III arguments yield the conclusion that God exists *necessarily* (i.e., God exists not merely in the actual world but in every possible world). He further notes that according to an article by Sean Choi, TAG is best understood as a pattern-II argument.⁵ Whether Choi is correct on this point can be debated, as we'll see, but let us grant it for now.

Having identified these three argument patterns, Reiter introduces his dilemma by asking the following question (which I paraphrase): *Does TAG purport to prove that God necessarily exists or merely that God actually exists?* Based on remarks by presuppositionalists Greg Bahnsen and Don Collett, Reiter suggests that proponents of TAG apparently wish to secure the stronger conclusion that God *necessarily* exists. His contention, however, is that TAG (construed as a pattern-II argument) faces an objection either way.

On the one hand, if TAG purports to prove only that God *actually* exists then TAG is *superfluous*, because a pattern-I argument could establish the very same conclusion. There would be no need for a distinctive transcendental argument after all (assuming that TAG is a pattern-II argument). On the other hand, if TAG purports to prove that God *necessarily* exists then TAG is *inadequate*, for the obvious reason that pattern-II arguments don't deliver that

⁵ Sean Choi, "The Transcendental Argument," in *Reasons for Faith: Making a Case for the Christian Faith*, ed. Norman L. Geisler and Chad V. Meister (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 231-247.

strong modal conclusion. A pattern-III argument would be needed to secure the necessity of God's existence.

After setting out this initial version of the dilemma, Reiter considers a possible objection. According to the Anselmian conception of God (ACG), God is a metaphysically necessary being: God must exist *necessarily* if he exists at all. Now why couldn't the proponent of TAG appeal to ACG to fortify his pattern-II argument, allowing him to infer God's necessary existence from *G* and thus delivering the desired conclusion? If this is an acceptable move then Reiter's dilemma would seem to fail, for a pattern-II argument *fortified with ACG* would be adequate after all.

Reiter offers two responses to the objection. He first observes that "it is by no means clear that the proponents of TAG are actually using the ACG assumption in their reasoning." This may well be true, but it doesn't follow that they *couldn't* appeal to ACG in response to Reiter's challenge. He goes on to note that some presuppositionalists have emphatically distanced the transcendental argument from "Anselmian thought and the ontological argument."⁶ But here Reiter conflates two distinct issues. One can consistently appeal to ACG (i.e., the notion that God must exist necessarily if he exists at all) without being committed to any version of the ontological argument (i.e., an argument designed to show that ACG entails God's actual existence). There doesn't appear to be anything inconsistent about advocating a transcendental argument that employs ACG while also rejecting Anselmian ontological arguments.⁷

In any case, Reiter considers his second response to the objection to be the more important. He observes that if proponents of TAG *are* employing ACG as a background assumption, they could do just as well with a pattern-I argument as with a pattern-II argument. For both patterns yield the conclusion that God exists, and thus either pattern fortified with ACG would yield the conclusion that God *necessarily* exists. On this point Reiter is absolutely correct. He therefore offers a *revised* dilemma for the proponent of TAG (construed as a

⁶ Reiter refers here to Collett, "Van Til and Transcendental Argument," 262. Other presuppositionalists, such as Van Til and Bahnsen, have been open to a "presuppositional version" of the ontological argument. Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1974), 102, 104, 196; Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1998), 620-621.

⁷ For the record, I think there are sound versions of the ontological argument (e.g., Plantinga's modal version) although I doubt their usefulness in apologetic contexts.

pattern-II argument fortified with ACG): on the one hand, if the desired conclusion is the *actuality* of God's existence then TAG is superfluous, because a pattern-I argument fortified with ACG is sufficient for this;⁸ on the other hand, if the desired conclusion is the *necessity* of God's existence then TAG is still superfluous, because a pattern-I argument fortified with ACG is also sufficient for this. Either way, TAG is superfluous if it has to appeal to ACG.

I will now suggest three lines of response that the proponent of TAG could offer in reply. The first is simply to reject the initial claim that TAG ought to be construed as a pattern-II argument. As noted above, Reiter derives this claim from Sean Choi, who in turn appeals to Robert Stern in support of the idea that the transcendental premise of a transcendental argument must express a *metaphysically necessary* condition (i.e., "Necessarily, if X, then Y," where X is some essential feature of human thought or experience).⁹ Stern's authority in this area is formidable. Still, there does not seem to be a consensus on this particular point in the literature on transcendental arguments.¹⁰ If there is any consensus on the nature of the transcendental premise, it is that the premise must at least express a *necessary condition* of some essential feature of human thought or experience (i.e., "If X, then Y"). It therefore seems open to the TAG proponent to argue that a pattern-I argument could qualify as a genuine transcendental argument.

⁸ In fact, a pattern-I argument *without* ACG would be sufficient, as per the original dilemma.

⁹ Robert Stern, ed., *Transcendental Arguments: Problems and Prospects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3-5.

¹⁰ For example, the notion that the transcendental premise must express a metaphysically necessary condition is absent in A. C. Grayling, "Transcendental Arguments," in *A Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Jonathan Dancy and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 506-509. Compare the lengthy discussion of transcendental arguments in A. C. Grayling, *The Refutation of Scepticism* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, 1985), chap. 4. In the latter Grayling repudiates the notion that TAs have a distinctive logical form: "No more is required of a TA than that it should assert that there is experience, or experience of a certain character, and then state under what conditions experience, or such experience, is possible. ... [T]o argue, or reason, or proceed transcendently, is just to argue or proceed, etc., with a certain aim in mind and a certain subject-matter to hand. This is indeed Strawson's view; that there is nothing distinctive about the form of TAs, and that what *is* distinctive about them is their aim and subject-matter. ... TAs are nothing special in virtue of their form, being distinctive only in virtue of their content and aims." *Ibid.*, 93, 94, 95.

But suppose he were wrong about this.¹¹ Would he be left empty handed and shamefaced? Not obviously so. After all, an argument from “one or more of the basic features of human life and experience” to the actuality of God’s existence would still be a very valuable apologetic argument, even if it didn’t qualify as a genuine *transcendental* argument. At worst, presuppositionalists would have to engage in some relabeling and tone down some of the stronger claims about the distinctiveness of their apologetic methodology.¹²

Nevertheless, there are more appealing responses available to the proponent of TAG that retain the pattern-II argument without succumbing to Reiter’s dilemma. A second response would be to argue that while TAG does indeed aim to show the necessity of God’s existence, the necessity in question is not *logical* necessity (either strict or broad) but some other significant kind of necessity. Before I explain what kind of necessity this might be, let us return to Reiter’s three argument patterns. In each case, *p* is said to be “some unspecified proposition”. In a transcendental argument, however, this minor premise isn’t just any proposition; it’s a proposition about some feature of human thought or experience (ideally, a feature that can only be denied on pain of performative inconsistency). So the kind of necessity exhibited by the conclusion of a transcendental argument is a *relative* necessity: it’s a necessity *indexed to human thought or experience*. In keeping with some of the literature on transcendental arguments, let us refer to this distinctive kind of necessity as *transcendental necessity*. On this understanding, a state of affairs *S* is *transcendentally necessary* just in case *S* obtains in the actual world and every other possible world in which there is human thought or experience.¹³

¹¹ For the record, I agree with Choi and Stern regarding the modality of the transcendental premise. I am simply exploring one possible line of response from the TAG proponent.

¹² The latter would probably be well advised in any case. I have argued elsewhere that the foundational principles of presuppositionalism are concerned with high-level methodological constraints and do not obviously require or rule out particular kinds of theistic arguments. James N. Anderson, “Presuppositionalism and Frame’s Epistemology,” in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*, ed. John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2009), 431-459.

¹³ Transcendental necessity can also be attributed to *entities*, as follows: *E* is *transcendentally necessary* just in case *E* exists in the actual world and every other possible world in which there is human thought or experience. One

An example may prove helpful. Consider the following simple transcendental argument:

- (1) We conceive of material objects.
- (2) Necessarily, we conceive of material objects only if material objects exist.¹⁴
- (3) Therefore, material objects exist.

Irrespective of whether the argument is a good one, most philosophers would grant that its conclusion cannot be *logically* necessary, for it seems evident that there are possible worlds in which no material objects exist. Nevertheless, if this transcendental argument were sound, its conclusion would exhibit a *transcendental necessity*: material objects exist not only in the actual world but also in every possible world in which there are human minds that conceive of material objects.

If this notion of transcendental necessity is coherent and non-trivial, as it appears to be, it is open for the proponent of TAG to claim that it shows God's existence to be *transcendentally necessary*: God must exist in every possible world in which there is human thought or experience.¹⁵ Furthermore, if this is indeed the kind of necessity the TAG proponent has in mind, then TAG isn't vulnerable to Reiter's dilemma. For while a pattern-II argument would

might worry that these definitions are too broad, since it would follow that necessarily existent abstract objects (e.g., numbers, propositions, and universals, on a realist view) are transcendently necessary. But this needn't be a concern if such objects turn out to be ontologically dependent on God (as argued by advocates of theistic activism and theistic conceptual realism). Another solution would be to add a relevance clause to our definitions, e.g., a state of affairs S is transcendently necessary just in case (i) S obtains in the actual world and every other possible world in which there is human thought or experience and (ii) S's obtaining is a *metaphysical precondition* (not merely a trivial logical condition) of human thought or experience.

¹⁴ This transcendental premise would most likely be defended by appeal some form of content externalism. For examples of transcendental arguments along such lines, see: Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1-21; John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (Simon and Schuster, 1995), 183-189; Anthony Brueckner, "Transcendental Arguments from Content Externalism," in *Transcendental Arguments: Problems and Prospects*, ed. Robert Stern (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 229-250.

¹⁵ Bahnsen actually uses the phrase "transcendental necessity" in his exposition of Van Til's apologetic and appears to have in mind precisely the notion I have described. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 488, 510, 600.

establish the transcendental necessity of God's existence, a pattern-I argument would not. The modal premise of pattern II ("*Necessarily, if p, then G*") is required to deliver the conclusion that God exists not merely in the actual world but in *every* possible world in which there is human thought or experience.¹⁶ A further advantage of this approach is that it allows the proponent of TAG to preserve the claim that there is something distinctive about the argument, namely, that it proves not merely that God exists but that God's existence is transcendently necessary.

Although this second way of evading Reiter's dilemma seems promising, I believe there is an even more attractive line of response available to the proponent of TAG, one that draws directly from statements made by leading presuppositionalists concerning what the argument involves. As with the previous response, it requires us to take a closer look at the "unspecified proposition" that serves as premise (1) in the argument.

Consider the following quotations (with my added emphasis) from Cornelius Van Til, the pioneer of presuppositionalism:

If reality were the sort of thing that non-Christian thinking assumes it to be, something not created and not controlled by God, then there would be *no possibility of human knowledge of it at all*. And if the human person were the sort of thing that non-Christian thinking assumes it to be, something sprung by chance from chance, then there would be *no possibility of it knowing the world at all*. It is just because the world and man are, as the Scriptures teach, created for one another and directed toward their goal through redemption by Christ, that *human predication is possible*.¹⁷

¹⁶ It should be noted that transcendental necessity is entirely compatible with broad logical necessity; in fact, it's easy to see that broad logical necessity *entails* transcendental necessity. So even if the proponent of TAG claims only that the argument proves the transcendental necessity of God's existence, he isn't thereby denying the broad logical necessity of God's existence. Indeed, if he holds to ACG he will be committed to both.

¹⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1967), 180. Cf. *Ibid.*, 200.

No intelligent predication is possible except on the basis of the truth, that is the absolute truth of Christianity.¹⁸

It is the firm conviction of every epistemologically self-conscious Christian that *no human being can utter a single syllable, whether in negation or affirmation*, unless it were for God's existence. Thus the transcendental argument seeks to discover what sort of foundations the house of human knowledge must have, in order to be what it is.¹⁹

The whole contention of the Christian theistic position is that what is called the subject-object relation, that is, *the possibility of my having knowledge of any object whatsoever*, is unintelligible except upon the presupposition that every subject of knowledge, since subjects are from this point of view also objects, owes its existence and its connotation, in the last analysis, to God.²⁰

The better theologians of the church ... have sensed something of the fact that all the theistic arguments should really be taken together and reduced to the one argument of *the possibility of human predication*. Intelligent predication about anything with respect to nature or with respect to man were *impossible unless God existed* as the ultimate reference point of it all.²¹

We argue, therefore, by "presupposition." The Christian, as did Tertullian, must contest the very principles of his opponent's position. The only "proof" of the Christian position is that unless its truth is presupposed there is *no possibility of "proving" anything at all*. The actual state of affairs as preached by Christianity is the necessary foundation of "proof" itself.²²

I have drawn attention to the fact that when Van Til characterizes the relationship between God and human thought, he often makes distinctively *modal* claims.²³ Van Til held not merely

¹⁸ Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1969), 252. Cf. *Ibid.*, 294.

¹⁹ Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1969), 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 131. Cf. *Ibid.*, 189.

²¹ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 102. Cf. *Ibid.*, 198, 229.

²² Cornelius Van Til, "My Credo," in *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1971), 21.

²³ For similar claims by other presuppositionalists, see: Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 499, 502n63, 513-14; Collett, "Van Til and Transcendental Argument," 261, 265-66.

that God's existence is a necessary condition of human thought (knowledge, predication, argumentation, etc.) but that his existence is a necessary condition of the *possibility* of such thought. Even had there been no human thought in actuality, God would still have had to exist, for his existence is a necessary condition of the *mere possibility* of human thought.²⁴

If this is indeed how Van Til conceived of the transcendental necessity of God's existence, we can be even more specific concerning the formulation of TAG, for the unspecified proposition *p* can now be replaced with the specific proposition that *human thought is possible*. A pattern-II formulation of TAG could therefore be expanded as follows (where *T* stands for the proposition that *there is human thought*):

(1) Possibly, *T*.

(2) Necessarily, if possibly, *T*, then *G*.

So (3) *G*.

Clearly this argument is deductively valid and delivers the conclusion that God exists. However, under the modal system S5, which is widely (though not universally) accepted by philosophers, an even stronger conclusion can be derived from the same premises, as follows:

(1) Possibly, *T*.

So (2) Necessarily, possibly, *T*. [from (1) and axiom 5]

(3) Necessarily, if possibly, *T*, then *G*. [transcendental premise]

So (4) If necessarily, possibly, *T*, then necessarily, *G*. [from (3) and axiom K]

So (5) Necessarily, *G*. [from (2) and (4)]

²⁴ Van Til isn't out on a limb regarding these modal claims, for such claims are also found in the mainstream literature on transcendental arguments. See, e.g., Stern, *Transcendental Arguments*, 3; Robert Stern, *Transcendental Arguments and Scepticism: Answering the Question of Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6, 8. Kant himself maintained that his transcendental arguments established the necessary conditions of *possible* experience and understanding (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A154-8/ B193-7).

In other words, if the transcendental premise is understood as a claim about a necessary condition of the *possibility* of human thought, then TAG delivers the conclusion that God's existence is not only transcendently necessary (in the sense discussed earlier) but necessary in the broad logical sense as well.²⁵ Furthermore, this interpretation of the transcendental premise of TAG would explain why a pattern-II argument is required after all. A pattern-I argument, which lacks the necessity operator in the conditional premise, would not deliver the same conclusion even if its first premise expressed a possibility claim; it would only deliver the conclusion that God *actually* exists.

We can therefore see that a transcendental argument for God constructed along these lines neatly evades Reiter's dilemma, for it is a pattern-II argument that is adequate but not superfluous: it delivers the desired conclusion—the necessity of God's existence—where a pattern-I argument with the same initial premise would not. Moreover, TAG understood in this way has no need to appeal to the Anselmian conception of God to bridge the gap between the actuality of God's existence and the necessity of God's existence.²⁶

²⁵ It's also worth noting that on several occasions Van Til makes an even stronger claim, to the effect that God is the only metaphysical ground of possibility *as such*. Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 12; Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 189; Cornelius Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1971), 98; Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1976), 13. If this deep connection between God and modality can be defended (perhaps by an argument for theistic conceptual realism with regard to possibilia) it would also enable a transcendental argument for God's necessary existence. If God's existence is indeed a necessary condition of possibility *as such*, it follows straightforwardly that God must exist in every possible world; thus *a fortiori* the possibility of human thought implies that God necessarily exists. On arguments for theistic conceptual realism, see Greg Welty, "Theistic Conceptual Realism: The Case for Interpreting Abstract Objects as Divine Ideas" (D.Phil., Oxford: University of Oxford, 2006).

²⁶ Reiter might object that this third response does not in fact evade his dilemma because it involves a covert shift from a pattern-II argument to a pattern-III argument (a move he tentatively recommends at the conclusion of his article). It is not obvious, however, that this formulation of TAG adopts pattern III rather than pattern II; after all, its initial premise is not *itself* a necessity claim. But even if the objection were conceded, there's no obvious reason why TAG couldn't be reconceived as a pattern-III argument.

I have argued that Reiter's dilemma should not be construed as a problem for TAG in principle and that at least three lines of response are available to the proponent of TAG. While the first of these has some clear disadvantages, it is not wholly without merit. The second and third responses, however, have the following virtues: they grant Reiter's characterization of the structure of TAG, they preserve presuppositionalist claims about the distinctiveness of TAG as a transcendental argument, and they are not *ad hoc* insofar as they have a basis in the writings of leading presuppositionalists. This is not to suggest, of course, that the TAG proponent doesn't face other formidable challenges in formulating and defending his argument, such as the task of defending the crucial transcendental premise.²⁷ But sufficient unto the day is the challenge thereof. Although Reiter's dilemma does not pose a significant difficulty for the proponent of TAG, presuppositionalists should be very grateful for his analytical prodding. It is regrettable that such prodding has proven necessary, but I trust that this response advances the discussion.²⁸

²⁷ Elsewhere I have tried to indicate some of the ways this defense might proceed. Anderson, "Presuppositionalism and Frame's Epistemology," 451-459; James N. Anderson, "The Lord of Non-Contradiction: An Argument for God from Logic" (presented at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Philosophical Society, Atlanta, GA, 2010).

²⁸ I am grateful to David Reiter and Paul Manata for comments on an earlier version of this note.